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The Rubbing
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THE RUBBING

We both wake up in the night. On her way from the bathroom, she meets me in the kitchen, a glass of water in my hand. *Will you please rub my legs?* she asks. I take her arm, walk her back to bed. She stretches on top of the blanket, turns on her stomach, pulls off her turban, and spreads her fingers through the gray fuzz on her scalp. I lean over to stroke it, too, before dousing my hands in rubbing alcohol. I massage her calves until my hands burn from the heat between us. *All over*, she says. I move up the backs of her knees. Then up her thighs. She moans as if the pain worsens under my care. I notice the open door, and wish I had shut it. I find the creases higher on her legs and slide the sides of my palms in them, bnishing along the lace hem of her nightgown. *Do you hurt all over?* I ask. *Yes*, she says, *even higher*. She quiets as I lift her nightgown and let it gather in the small of her back. She wears nothing else. I take her buttocks in my hands, knead them. I now know how soft and loose the skin of my own body will feel in thirty years. We have no words to travel through the walls, to wake up my sister so that she will walk in and see. Our mother, on her stomach, her gown hitched to her waist. Me, straddled over her body, about to collapse, on my knees.